

2021

## Biography of Agustina Guffain Vda. de Doittau

Michele R. Hewlett-Gómez, PhD

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digital.kenyon.edu/espiritismo\\_agustinaguffain](https://digital.kenyon.edu/espiritismo_agustinaguffain)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hewlett-Gómez, PhD, Michele R., "Biography of Agustina Guffain Vda. de Doittau" (2021). *AGUSTINA GUFFAIN VDA. DE DOITTAU*. Paper 3.

[https://digital.kenyon.edu/espiritismo\\_agustinaguffain/3](https://digital.kenyon.edu/espiritismo_agustinaguffain/3)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the El Espiritismo de las mujeres puertorriqueñas: De las extraordinarias pioneras a sus herederas contemporáneas at Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in *AGUSTINA GUFFAIN VDA. DE DOITTAU* by an authorized administrator of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [noltj@kenyon.edu](mailto:noltj@kenyon.edu).

## **María Agustina Guffain Lanzón de Doittau (1870-1929)**

By Dr. Michele R. Hewlett-Gómez, Great Granddaughter  
Retired Professor of Education  
Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas

The spiritist María Agustina Guffain Lanzón de Doittau was a tireless trailblazer with a vision and passion for social change, and, more importantly, a woman with a deep devotion to family. In the early twentieth century, Agustina Guffain was known as a pioneer and one of the most influential leaders of her time.<sup>1</sup>

A profile of Agustina's life through historical records of family, literature, and news, although gaps exist in dates and events, provides a glimpse of her personal experiences.<sup>2</sup> They also showcase some of the influences on her belief system and deep devotion to the Spiritism Movement in Puerto Rico at that time.

### **Early Life**

Agustina Guffain was born on April 24, 1863 in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, the third child of Pedro Bruno Guffain Rebollé and Juana María Celestina Lanzón de Vernoes from France.<sup>3</sup> Her parents arrived in Puerto Rico during the mid-1840s at a time of major economic growth; at some point, they settled in Mayagüez.

The Guffain-Lanzón family were well-educated and prominent members of the Mayagüez and Cabo Rojo communities. Agustina's family included a brother, Carlos Pedro, born in 1854 and sister, María Rafaela, born in 1860. The family remained for years in Puerto Rico where they owned and operated a number of successful business enterprises.

Exactly how Agustina developed a belief in Spiritism is not known. We could speculate it was from her family of French descendants who lived in the same country as the father of Spiritism, Frenchman Allan Kardec (1804-1869). That is, the Guffain-Lanzón family might have had exposure to the Kardec



Figure 1: Photo of María Agustina Guffain Lanzón de Doittau, Early 1900s.

<sup>1</sup> Nancy Herzig Shannon, *El Iris de Paz: El espiritismo y la mujer en Puerto Rico, 1900 – 1905*, Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán Inc., 2001, p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Dr. Michele R. Hewlett-Gómez, great-granddaughter of María Agustina Guffain Lanzón de Doittau, for giving us access and use of these photographs and other materials.

<sup>3</sup> Baptismal Certificate for Agustina Guffain Lanzón, Filed 9 June 1863. Cathedral Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria, Mayagüez, Puerto Rico.

belief system in France and the seed to this thinking was planted in Agustina as she was growing up. Listening to her father's conversations with other intellectuals at family gatherings may also have contributed. It is likely that Agustina's influence into Spiritism occurred at the time that this movement was at its height in the region and throughout the Island.

### Agustina and Francisco

Agustina's first marriage, at 16, was to Francisco de Jesús Abad Hecht of San Juan. Their marriage occurred on July 11, 1879 at Our Lady of the Candelaria Cathedral.<sup>4</sup> It is likely that the Hecht family lived close to Agustina's family and were part of the elites of Mayagüez. Little could be extracted from other historical records about Francisco's family and his professional life. One piece of information on their marriage certificate, however, revealed that he was abandoned at birth. This detail contributed to the mystery of Francisco's birth, death, and parental records. With the absence of additional documents, it is not known exactly how long Agustina and Francisco were married. However, gleaning from accessible records of Agustina and her second marriage, one could conclude that she and Francisco were together, at most, for seven to eight years and had no children. Although Francisco was not in Agustina's life for very long, it is possible that the circumstances of his birth may have shaped the direction of her activist efforts.

### Agustina and Carlos



Figure 2: Photo of Carlos Doittau Ponce de León, Early 1900s.

Agustina's second marriage was to Carlos Doittau Ponce de León. While the marriage records of Agustina and Carlos have not been found, we do know that on June 18, 1904, Agustina and Carlos reaffirmed or solidified their marriage vows.<sup>5</sup> This suggests that formal marriage vows between the two were exchanged prior to this date.

Carlos, born on September 8, 1859 in Hormigueros, was the son of Luis Mariano Doittau of France and María Cleofe Ponce de León Sepúlveda of Spain.<sup>6</sup> He was a direct descendent of Juan Ponce de León, the Spanish explorer and first governor of Puerto Rico. Carlos' family included two brothers, also born in Hormigueros; an older brother, Mariano Luis born in 1858 and a younger brother, Luis Gustavo born in 1864. Sadly, Luis Gustavo lived only two years.

<sup>4</sup> Certificate of Marriage, Agustina Guffain Lanzón to Francisco de Jesús Abad Hecht, Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. Filed July 11, 1879. Cathedral Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria, Mayagüez, Puerto Rico.

<sup>5</sup> Certificate of Marriage, María Agustina Guffain Lanzón to Carlos Doittau Ponce de León, Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. Filed June 10, 1904. Civil Registry of Puerto Rico (1899-1904), Mayagüez, Puerto Rico.

<sup>6</sup> Birth Certificate for Carlos Doittau Ponce de León, Filed June 09, 1863. Basílica Menor Nuestra Señora de la Monserrate, Hormigueros, Puerto Rico.

Family records did not yield information on how Agustina and Carlos met. However, we can deduce the Guffain-Lanzón family was acquainted with Carlos' family, who were well-educated and respectable members of Cabo Rojo. They also had similar business interests and perhaps religious beliefs. Agustina's beliefs in Spiritism may have also been fostered by Carlos's parents, but probably cemented by Carlos himself.

A story related in Gerardo Hernández Aponte's history of Spiritism in Puerto Rico, indicated that in 1874, Carlos had adopted the doctrines of Spiritism after attending two spiritist sessions hosted by family friends.<sup>7</sup> This could explain why Carlos was an integral part of Agustina's involvement in Puerto Rico's Spiritist Movement.

Professionally, Carlos was an astute businessman and philanthropist who prospered from the economic growth in the late 1800s. One business included a sugar plantation between Cabo Rojo and San Germán. A second business was as a partner in the prestigious and respected firm, Tornabells and Company, a real estate and merchandise brokerage company in Mayagüez. Both afforded them a comfortable lifestyle.

### Children

Agustina and Carlos had four children, all born in Mayagüez. Their first child, María Celestina Doittau Guffain, was born in 1888, followed by a second child, María Guillermina in 1889. A third child, Carlos Pedro was born in 1893 and a fourth child, María Agustina (Agustinita), born in January 1895. Tragically the morning of July 28, 1895, Agustinita died suddenly at the age of six months. That same day, as was customary, she was laid to rest in her white-laced baptismal dress after receiving a blessing of holy water.<sup>8</sup> Memories and thoughts of reconciliation from the loss of their beloved Agustinita were evident in a subsequent poem and letters.<sup>9</sup>

In less than two months from Agustinita's passing, on September 4, 1895, Agustina's sister, María Rafaela, died at the age of 37.<sup>10</sup> The hardships of both deaths so close in time and to her heart certainly would have tested her beliefs. The reassurance she and Carlos must have felt as a result of being ever-present in their spiritual lives surely would have affected their healing.

Agustina's observance of traditional customs, like annual celebrations on an anniversary of a person's death until the eighth year, would have provided a shining light of inner peace. In the case of Agustinita, a final bridge of disincarnation was revealed through a poem entitled "*A la memoria de la niña, Agustinita, en el octavo aniversario de la desencarnación.*"<sup>11</sup> This poem, written by JGB (unknown alias), reflected a continued bond between a mother and a child's

---

<sup>7</sup> Gerardo A. Hernández Aponte, *El Espiritismo en Puerto Rico, 1860-1907*. San Juan, Puerto Rico: Academia Puertorriqueña de la Historia, 2015, p. 328.

<sup>8</sup> Death Certificate for María Agustina Doittau Guffain, Filed July 28, 1895, Cathedral Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria, Mayagüez, Puerto Rico.

<sup>9</sup> *El Iris de Paz*, 'A la Memoria de Agustinita, en el octavo aniversario de la desencarnación', August 03, 1903, pp. 5-6. Agustina Guffain. Letter written to Guillermina Gómez Doittau, August 20, 1919;

<sup>10</sup> Death Certificate for María Rafaela Guffain Lanzón de Brau, Filed September 04, 1895, Cathedral Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria, Mayagüez, Puerto Rico.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, August 03, 1903, pp. 5-6.

spiritual life. An excerpt gives a glimpse of the power of Agustinita's voice as if talking directly to her mother,

*...I remember those liquid pearls that seeped from your eyes and bathed your cheeks when contemplating my inert matter on the happy day of my disincarnation; Silent tears that expressed the pain for my momentary departure. I remember that resignation with which you eased your crying because you hoped to reopen our interrupted relationship in the material world.<sup>12</sup>*

These abrupt deaths of her daughter and sister, and perhaps the death of her father six years earlier in 1889,<sup>13</sup> would have certainly inspired deep emotion. On one occasion at an evening reading on May 21, 1902 at the *Centro Esperanza*, Agustina expressed the passion of love for her father, again linking the harmony and reality of her human sensitivity with his Spirit.<sup>14</sup>

## Activism

As the Spiritist movement continued to gain momentum in the last years of the nineteenth century, there were catastrophic personal hardships and financial losses created by the United States invasion (1898) and Hurricane Ciriaco (1899). This impacted, in some way, every individual on the Island. As people searched for hope and inspiration to lift them from their miseries, Spiritism became a vehicle for guidance and empowerment, especially in the areas of morality and women's advocacy.

It was around this time that Agustina created and began publishing the first edition of *El Iris de Paz* on December 20, 1900.<sup>15</sup> This small, ten-page pocketbook sized magazine covered an array of topics dedicated to the psychology of Spiritism as espoused by Allan Kardec. The logic of a weekly professionally written publication, costing an affordable 30 cents a month quickly captured the attention of many followers.

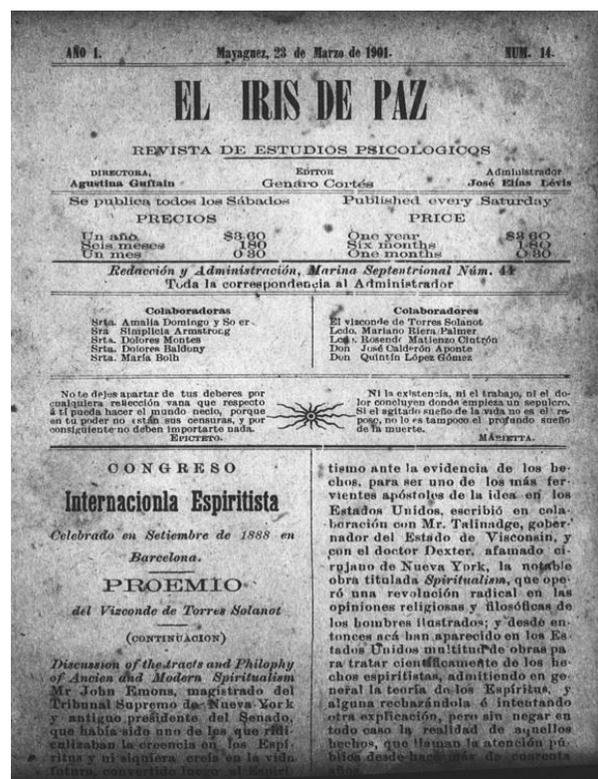


Figure 3: An example of *El Iris de Paz*, January 27, 1901.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Death Certificate for Pedro Bruno Guffain Rebollé, Filed May 22, 1889. Puerto Rico Civil Registry of Deaths (1885-2001), Mayagüez, Puerto Rico.

<sup>14</sup> *El Iris de Paz*, May 24, 1904, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Hernández Aponte. *El Espiritismo...*, *Op. Cit.*, p.159.

[https://digital.kenyon.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1040&context=espiritismo\\_elirisdepaz1901](https://digital.kenyon.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1040&context=espiritismo_elirisdepaz1901)

Demand for *El Iris de Paz* grew across the Island as it provided current, up to date ideas and teachings as well as pertinent news from local, regional and international events. *El Iris de Paz* acted as a vehicle to ease readers into understanding the doctrine of Spiritism, but also was a means



Figure 4: Agustina Guffain Vda. De Doittau, 1907.

to express opposition to the oppressive acts of the government and church. More importantly, since spiritists were believers and promoters of change, *El Iris de Paz* sought to fulfill this aim. As the founder and director of *El Iris de Paz*, Agustina ensured that quality and informative literature would be written by prominent members of society. This often included poets as well as others whose expressions described historical, philosophical, political and religious viewpoints. Reviews of select editions of *El Iris de Paz* highlighted evening readings, thoughts and announcements from across the Island intended to reinforce beliefs and empower their physical and spiritual self. As a result, people could then embrace Spiritism as an alternative to the doctrines of Catholicism.

From both Puerto Rican and specific family history, it can be seen that Agustina quickly became known as one of the most respected and admired spiritists and extraordinary mediums on the Island. From family history, one can see how together Agustina and Carlos actively participated in evening readings in their large Spanish colonial style home on Mendez Vigo Avenue in Mayagüez. Agustina's granddaughter, Emilia Guillermina 'Minita' Nadal, recalled visitors walking through the house to a large backroom; her mother, Guillermina, said that Agustina would lead evening seances with small groups of prominent elite business and community leaders from across the Island.<sup>16</sup>

As the charismatic Agustina and Carlos became more popular with followers, they grew and formed a group, which they named themselves, *Grupo Esperanza*.<sup>17</sup> Shortly after that, cities across Puerto Rico had formed their own centers as a podium for speakers to promote Spiritism.

Often evening readings were held at different homes or centers and included young ladies and women, often mothers and daughters. At one reading on April 10, 1904, Agustina's daughter, Guillermina, at 13, performed a musical arrangement entitled "Inspiración." She along with other entertainers were performing for the reopening of Hospital Caridad and Consuelo in Mayagüez.

<sup>16</sup> Emilia Guillermina 'Minita' Nadal, Oral interview, June 2001, by Michele Hewlett-Gómez, niece, at Minita's home in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Nancy Herzog Shannon, *El Iris de Paz*, p. 54 - 55.

<sup>17</sup> *El Iris de Paz*, March 30, 1901, p.6; Hernández Aponte. *El Espiritismo, Op. Cit.*, p. 375; Nancy Herzog Shannon, *El Iris de Paz*, p. 84.

This hospital, established two years earlier by the Centro Espiritual Esperanza, served orphaned children, elderly people, and invalids free of charge.<sup>18</sup>

The experience of helping others in need resonated for both Agustina and her daughter Guillermina. This lifelong commitment to community and children's welfare was like a special calling for them. For Agustina specifically, this calling was likely deepened by the memory of Francisco's plight at birth. The impact of her first husband's abandonment could have very well steered her from elitism to activism for the good of all society. As historical records indicate, Agustina was a strong advocate for children welfare, pushing for both community and government reform in this area.

Another of Agustina and Carlos' accomplishments was that they were initial founders and Board members of the Federación de Espiritistas de Puerto Rico. Carlos held an elective position as the treasurer between 1903 - 1904 and Agustina was Honorary President in several cities across the island. The Federation's first assembly in Mayagüez was hosted by Carlos and Agustina on April 18 - 19, 1903.<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, Agustina and Carlos' life together was cut short. On January 22, 1907, Carlos, at 47, died at his home in Mayagüez.<sup>20</sup> After the loss of her husband and faithful partner, records show that Agustina sold his business interests in Tornabells and Company to a relative, Gustave Saint Laurent. It is likely that she dedicated more time to managing other business and family affairs. Still living in Mayagüez, Agustina continued her advocacy for social reform through Spiritism.

### Later Life

After Carlos' death, Agustina continued the writing and publishing aspects of her Spiritism. In September 1907, she published, *Efluvios del Alma, Colección de artículos y pensamientos*, that she had written over a course of seven years.<sup>21</sup>

As usual, her prolific writings depicted a deep compassion and idealistic search for the truth as well as expressing the love of humanity and her children. In *Efluvios del Alma*, Agustina included a dedication to Guillermina amplifying the profoundness of a mother's love and inspiration for a quality earthly life.

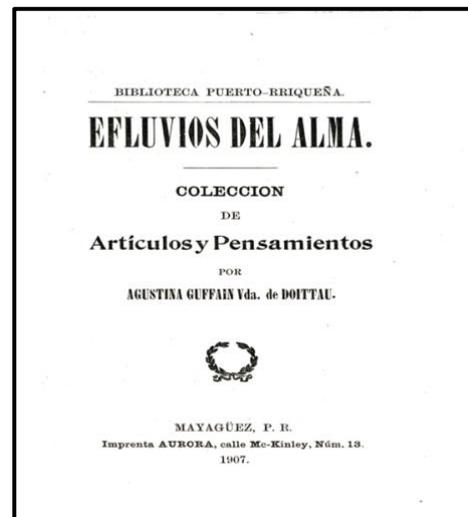


Figure 5: Efluvios del Alma, Colección de artículos y pensamientos, Agustina Guffain Vda. de Doittau, 1907.

<sup>18</sup> *El Iris de Paz*, April 16, 1904, p. 8; Hernández Aponte. *El Espiritismo ... op. cit.*, p. 370.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, *El Iris de Paz*. p. 54 - 55.

<sup>20</sup> Death Certificate for Carlos Pedro Doittau Ponce de León, Filed January 22, 1907, Puerto Rico Civil Registry of Deaths (1885-2001), Mayagüez, Puerto Rico.

<sup>21</sup> Agustina Guffain vda de Doittau. *Efluvios del Alma, colección de artículos y pensamientos*. Imprenta Aurora, Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, 1907.

*'To my daughter Guillermina  
 To you, beloved daughter, I dedicate my humble writings.  
 I thought of you so that during your short or prolonged  
 earthly existence, you engrave in your mind the teachings that, stripped of literary finery,  
 you find in my writings influences of the passion of  
 my rationalist Christian ideas.  
 So, if you create a small BOUQUET  
 with those little flowers,  
 perhaps one day they will envelop your new home.'*  
*Your loving mother,  
 Agustina.* <sup>22</sup>

Even without Carlos, it is evident that Agustina continued working as a spiritist leader. During the first ten years of the twentieth century, governmental pressures toward Americanism and Catholicism had created a shift in the political and social climates. These governmental pressures had begun to effect change in the Spiritist movement. Persons with contrary beliefs began to leave on their own or were exiled from the Island. On one occasion, a story recalled by Minita, Guillermina's daughter, re-counts that her grandmother, Agustina, had to hastily flee to Havana, Cuba with Lola Rodríguez de Tió disguised as a man.<sup>23</sup> Lola, a first cousin to Carlos, was a well-known poet and political activist. She and Agustina shared similar viewpoints on social reform and women's independence. As we know from history, Havana, along with Florida and New York, were havens for spiritists, to which Agustina often traveled.

Throughout the years, Agustina had traveled many times to and from New York. By 1917, Agustina had established residency in New York City where she lived with family. By that time, New York was well-known as a central region for spiritist activities. Here, self-expression and political freedom created an atmosphere for Agustina and other intellectuals to share similar beliefs on Spiritism.

While in New York, Agustina remained in contact with family. Her devotion to family was very apparent in personal letters to Guillermina. In one letter dated August 22, 1919, Agustina expressed her sorrow for Guillermina's loss of her eight-month-old child. She wrote "I am so sorry of Milagrino's death. I feel the pain you have...."<sup>24</sup> Her granddaughter's death undoubtedly sparked memories of her beloved Agustinita's death almost 24 years earlier. The daughter-mother bond between Guillermina and Agustina more than likely grew with Guillermina's frequent visits to New York, which often lasted several weeks to months.

---

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. i.

<sup>23</sup> Emilia Guillermina 'Minita' Nadal. Oral interview, June 2001, by Michele Hewlett-Gómez, niece, at Emilia Guillermina's home in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

<sup>24</sup> Agustina Guffain. Letter written to Guillermina Gómez Doittau, August 22, 1919.

On April 13, 1929 at 7:30 in the morning, Agustina died peacefully in her Manhattan, New York apartment eleven days before her 66<sup>th</sup> birthday. The next day, she was buried at St. Michael's Cemetery in Queens where she remains at rest today.<sup>25</sup>

### **After Life**

Her death did not erase her life but only enhanced the impact, then and now, on persons, communities, professionals, and many unknown others. Agustina became synonymous with commitment and societal change.

To spiritists and followers alike, Agustina resides as a genuine lively Spirit in this earthly realm of transformations. To the Guffain and Doittau families, Agustina leaves a legacy of deep family values, belief in humanity, and a dedication to follow one's beliefs to guide our future generations.

“To understand the magnet that attracts our soul, you need to look at the past.”<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Death Certificate for Agustina Guffain Lanzón vda Doittau. Filed April 17, 1929. No. 9579, New York State Department of Health of the City of New York.

<sup>26</sup> *El Iris de Paz*, May 24, 1902, p. 3.